

Professional natural resource management staff numbers up over last decade

By Abigail Miller

THE ROSTER of professional natural resource management staff in the National Park Service is growing steadily, according to an analysis of personnel data conducted in 2003. For this analysis, professional resource managers are those whose positions are officially classified by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) as professional (not technician-level) biologists, physical scientists, mining engineers, and geographers. Of the 272 national parks deemed to have significant natural resources, approximately 70% (192) had at least one professional-level resource manager on staff in 2003, compared to about 50% (134) 10 years ago. In 2003, 77% of those staff were stationed in parks or field-based support units (such as inventory and monitoring networks), compared to two-thirds in 1993. About 80% of the positions occupied by these staff are in biological disciplines, with a small increase in the percentage of specialized biologists. Additionally, the percentage of park biologists having advanced degrees upon entering the National Park Service increased slightly between 2000 and 2003.

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Similar analyses in 1993, 1997, and 2000 round out the picture of professional natural resource staffing trends over the last decade. The first year, 1993, reflects the loss of approximately 200 NPS researchers and related support staff to a reorganization. By 1997 the natural resource ranks had rebounded, almost certainly from budget initiatives in fiscal years 1994 and 1995 aimed at increasing natural resource professionals in the parks. The staffing increases in 2003 undoubtedly reflect gains made through the Natural Resource Challenge. However, little Challenge-related growth would have been reflected in the (February) 2000 totals, only five months into the first year of this initiative. Therefore, the staffing increase between 1997 and 2000 may demonstrate a steadily growing perceived need for natural resource professionals, irrespective of funding initiatives.

These conclusions are based on data from a single two-week pay period in 1993, 1997, 2000, and 2003, and represent a snapshot in time. While aggregate comparisons are valid, the specific information about an individual park is not necessarily valid for another time or on average for that park. A few other limitations of the data should be noted:

- Education levels are sometimes inaccurately or incompletely recorded and are rarely updated to note ongoing or additional education; the information generally reflects only entry-level education.

- The data do not reflect technician-level staff or those in ranger or related positions that may perform natural resource management duties. Undoubtedly, more staff perform natural resource-related duties, although not as professional-level staff, than are indicated by the data. In many instances, nonprofessional resource management positions have been reclassified over the past decade to professional-level positions. These reclassified positions are reflected in this analysis.
- Before 2003, positions were categorized administratively by location: park, regional office, or Washington Office. The park category was expanded in 2003 to include field-based park support units. This change reflects the addition of staff to Exotic Plant Management Teams and Inventory and Monitoring networks, which may be associated with various organizational units, but are all field-based.

Despite shortcomings in the data, a number of additional conclusions are evident. The number of professional resource managers in the National Park Service has more than doubled, from 487 in 1993 to 1,049 in 2003. Certainly this represents growth in numbers of professional staff dedicated solely to natural resource management. But it also likely reflects the replacement of technicians and rangers by resource professionals through a process of job reclassification or through replacement when vacancies occurred. Technicians and rangers often carried out natural resource management duties, although OPM does not consider these positions to be professional resource management positions.

While there has been some growth in positions that are classified as specialists, 62% of all biologists are classified as general biologists. The percentage of professionals in physical science positions has held steady over the decade at about 20%. Biologists made up 88% and 86% of park resource professionals in 2000 and 2003, respectively, and the percentage of these biologists with advanced degrees has grown from 49% to 53% over the same period. This likely reflects the influence of the Natural Resource Challenge, which funded new Inventory and Monitoring personnel and air and aquatic resource professionals placed in the field (see previous articles, this chapter). Many of these staff hold advanced degrees.

All in all, these trends demonstrate significant progress in advancing natural resource management to the professional levels necessary for effective park preservation. ■

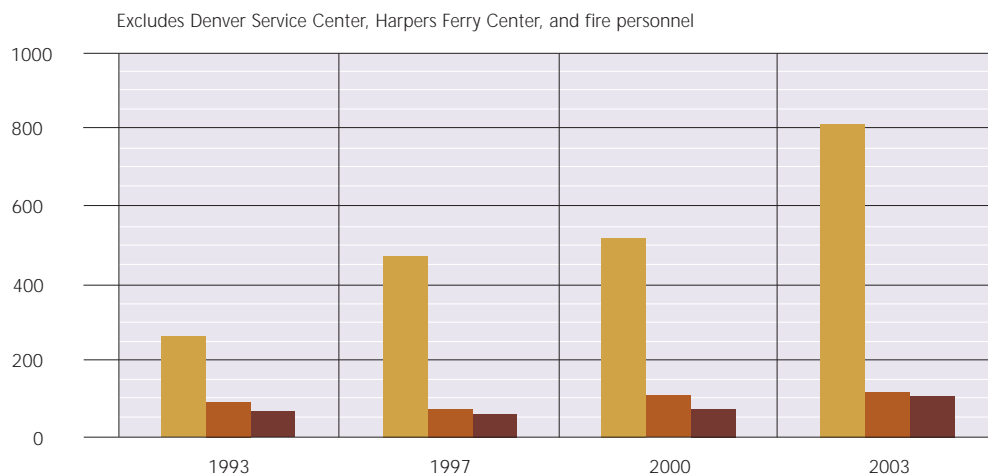
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staffing trends

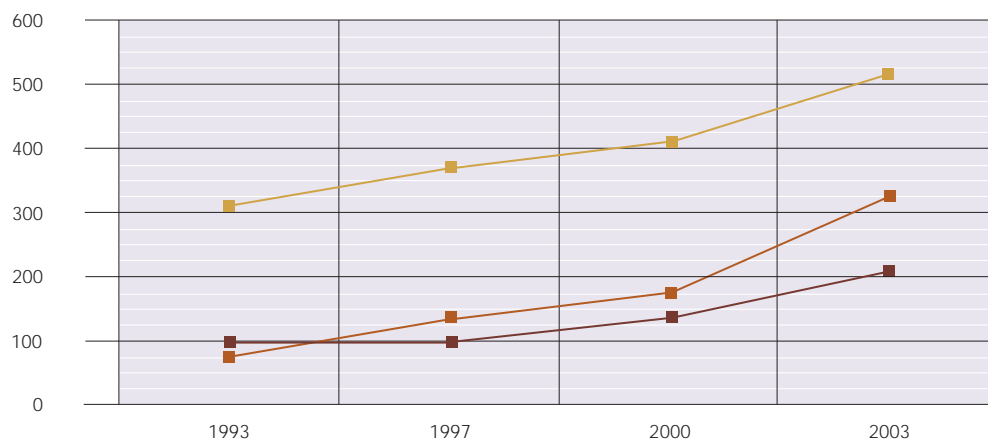
NUMBERS OF NATURAL RESOURCE PROFESSIONALS BY LOCATION

- Parks and I&M Networks
- Regional and Support Offices
- Washington Office



TYPES OF NATURAL RESOURCE PROFESSIONALS

- General Biologists
- Specialized Biologists
- Physical Scientists



NPSFACT

Approximately 70% or 192 of the 272 national parks deemed to have significant natural resources (**I&M parks**) had at least one professional-level resource manager on staff in 2003, compared to about 50% or 134 a decade ago.